

Grammar-Translation Method

ALESSANDRO BENATI

Framing the Issue

Richards and Schmidt (2002, p. 231) have defined the grammar-translation method as “a method of foreign or second language teaching which makes use of translation and grammar study as the main teaching and learning activities.” The grammar-translation method was originally called the classical method because it was mainly used in the teaching of Latin and Greek in the 16th century. In the early 19th century, which saw the decline of Latin and its relegation to an academic language, the grammar-translation method was adopted to help L2 learners to read, study, and translate foreign languages and language literature. Two of the key assumptions of this methodology were that: (1) language learners must develop a good knowledge (learning and memorizing grammatical rules) of the grammatical systems of their first (L1) and second languages (L2), and (2) they need to be able to develop the ability to translate texts from their L1 into the L2 and vice versa. Ability to accurately translate texts was associated with the ability to learn the grammatical system of the target language. The grammar-translation method viewed the study of a language as the memorization of rules to be able to manipulate its morphological and syntactical system. Grammar is taught deductively (by the presentation of rules followed by translation practice) and accuracy in translating sentences and texts is the main focus of this methodology.

As Richards and Rodgers (2001, p. 6) have pointed out “Grammar Translation dominated European and foreign language teaching from the 1840s to the 1940s, and in modified form it continues to be widely used in some parts of the world today.”

Making the Case

The grammar-translation method consists of a number of main principles which represent the building blocks of this language teaching methodology.

The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching, First Edition.

Edited by John I. Liantas (Project Editor: Margo DelliCarpini).

© 2018 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published 2018 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

DOI: 10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0153

Principles

According to the grammar-translation method, the learning and teaching of languages consist of the following principles:

- Teachers must assert their authority, as their role is to transmit knowledge to learners and the learner's native language is the medium for instruction. Very little teaching is done in the target language. It is an extremely teacher-centered method of teaching.
- Learners need to be able to read the literature written in the target language and learn all the relevant vocabulary and grammar. Learners do not play any active role and there is little learner-learner interaction.
- Literary language is superior to the spoken language. Learning a language consists of being able to read and translate a text into and out of the target language. The main focus of teaching is to develop the learner's ability to read, write, and translate. Teachers would not direct learner's attention to the content of the text which is treated as a translation exercise. Reading of very complex classical texts begins early. To be able to communicate using the target language is not an important goal for learners.
- The focus is on accuracy and not fluency. The grammar is taught systematically (following a sequencing grammar syllabus) through explicit extensive and elaborated teaching of grammatical rules. The main assumption is that a second language is learned through the deduction of the grammatical properties of a target L2. When learners have developed a conscious and explicit representation of that language, they can apply this ability in the production of sentences through translation from one language to the other.
- Errors are corrected. If learners answer a question incorrectly, the teacher would select somebody else to give the correct answer and/or he/she replies directly.
- Learners should memorize vocabulary in the form of isolated word lists. Vocabulary in the target language is learned through translation from the native language.

Criticism

In the grammar-translation method, the main goal for instruction is the ability to attain a high proficiency standard in translation and grammar accuracy. It does not require teachers to be native speakers (classes are not taught using the target language) and it does not require a lot of preparation. The ability to communicate using the target language is not the main goal for instruction. This methodology provides learners with the view that language is simply a collection of words which are isolated and independent. It seemed that for this methodology there is no need for learners to master the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing).

The grammar-translation method was questioned by researchers and language educators in the mid-19th century. Researchers of L1 and L2 acquisition believed that people learn languages by being exposed to the target language (the language they hear) and by making connections between words and their meaning. Educators emphasized the importance of communication and the development of oral and

comprehension skills. Because of the emphasis of the grammar-translation method on the memorization of grammatical rules and translation, and the lack of attention to the development of comprehension and speaking proficiency, this methodology was rejected. Teachers decided to direct their attention toward methodology such as the direct method (Wong, 2005) that fostered listening and communication skills.

Richards and Rodgers (2001, p. 4) describe the grammar-translation method as “a tedious experience of memorizing endless lists of unusable grammar rules and vocabulary and attempting to produce perfect translations of stilted or literary prose,” and they continue, “it is a method for which there is no theory. There is no literature that offers a rationale or justification for it or that attempts to relate it to issues in linguistics, psychology, or educational theory.” Despite these shortcomings there are still traces of the use of the grammar-translation method by language teachers today (Richards & Rogers, 2001).

Pedagogical Implications

Based on the principles outlined in the previous section, a variety of techniques have been developed (Larsen-Freeman, 2000) to help learners translate, practice, and memorize the new language. The main techniques are:

1. *Read and translate a literary passage.* Learners are asked to translate a literary passage and then translate (mainly written translation) the target language into their native language. The passage provides the stimulus for learning vocabulary and grammar. The main focus is reading and writing at the expense of listening and speaking. Learners' native language is used for explanations, translations, and comparisons between the native language and the target language.
2. *Reading comprehension questions.* Learners answer questions in the target language based on the reading text and on the student's own experience related to the text.
3. *Deductive grammar practice.* Grammatical rules are presented by teachers using paradigms and examples. Learners are asked to learn rules and apply them through translation exercises. Sentences are the main unit of the teaching session and learners are asked to translate them into and out of the target language.
4. *Fill in the blanks exercises.* Learners are given sentences or passages with words missing. They are asked to fill in the blanks with the correct vocabulary or grammatical item.
5. *Memorization practice.* Learners are given a list of words with the native language equivalent and they are asked to memorize them. The selection of the vocabulary is based on the text used and learners are taught through bilingual word lists. They are also asked to memorize grammatical rules, and grammatical paradigms. The priority is to become accurate and to attain very high standards in translation.
6. *Composition.* Teachers give learners a topic and ask them to write a composition on that topic in the target language. The topic is usually based on some aspects of the reading text.

A typical example of the way the grammar-translation method is operationalized in a language classroom is the following (let us imagine that this is a class where the learners' mother tongue is English and they are learning French):

The teacher asks (in English) the class to read an excerpt from a literary text (the text is in French). Each learner is asked to contribute to the reading in class. After they have finished reading, the teacher asks them to translate from French into English. The teacher provides the learners with a list of words translated into English. When learners have finished translating the text, the teacher asks (in English) whether they have any questions. The teacher translates all the words and answers all the questions in English. Learners are asked to complete a reading comprehension activity about the text they have read. The questions are in English and the learners are required to answer in English.

After 30 minutes, the teacher, talking in English, asks learners to check their work. Learners are asked to read the questions and provide the answers in English. Learners take turns and if the answer is not correct, the teacher invites another learner to provide the right answer.

Another example is the way grammar is practiced in the grammar-translation method. Learners are given grammatical rules presented with examples. The teacher explains the rules in English and provides a list of the grammatical rules using paradigms (see example in the box).

FREQUENCY ADVERBS IN FRENCH

Definition: An adverb of frequency explains *how often* something occurs.

Adverbs of frequency are usually placed after the verb.

Exception: *Parfois* is normally placed at the beginning of the sentence.

<i>French</i>	<i>English</i>
Je fais toujours mes devoirs	I always do my homework.
Parfois, Luc ne fait pas ses devoirs	Sometimes Luc doesn't do his homework.

LIST OF FREQUENCY ADVERBS IN FRENCH

The following shows the most common adverbs of frequency.

<i>French</i>	<i>English</i>
Toujours	Always
Parfois	Sometimes
Rarement	Rarely
Souvent	Often
Jamais	Never
Encore	Again

After reading over the rules and the examples, learners are asked to fill in the blanks of the sentences given or translate sentences from English into French and vice versa (see example exercises). When they have finished, they read the sentences aloud and the teacher corrects them if necessary.

EXERCISE

Complete the following sentences with the right adverb in French. The equivalent in English is provided in brackets.

1. Je vais (always) _____ à l'école le matin.
2. Je vais (rarely) au _____ cinéma le week-end.
3. Je regarde (often) _____ le football à la télévision.

The exercise continues in a similar fashion.

EXERCISE

Translate the following sentences from English into French.

1. I rarely get up late on weekends.

2. I often take a bath at night.

3. I am sometimes late for class.

The exercise continues in a similar fashion.

SEE ALSO: Grammar Assessment; Grammar and Language Proficiency

References

- Larsen-Freeman, D. (2000). *Techniques and principles in language teaching* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2001). *Approaches and methods in language teaching: A description and analysis*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J. C., & Schmidt, R. (2002). *Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics*. London, England: Pearson Education.
- Wong, W. (2005). *Input enhancement: From theory and research to the classroom*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Suggested Readings

- Brown, H. D. (2006). *Principles of language learning and teaching* (5th ed.). Harlow, England: Pearson ESL.
- Chang, Shih-Chuan. (2011). A contrastive study of grammar translation method and communicative approach in teaching English grammar. *English Language Teaching*, 4, 15–16.
- Ellis, R. (2006). Current issues in the teaching of grammar: An SLA perspective. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40(1), 83–107.
- Long, M., & Doughty, C. (2009). *The handbook of language teaching*. Oxford, England: Wiley Blackwell.
- Nunan, D. (1999). *Second language teaching and learning*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.